



The Three Rioters.

(From 'Tales from Chaucer,' by M. E. H., in the 'Alliance News and Temperance Reformer'.)

In Flanders once lived a company of young folk that haunted folly, and danced and played at dice day and night to the music of lutes and harps and gitterns—eating and drinking more than they could hold, doing the devil sacrifice in his own temple. Their oaths and blasphemy were grisly to hear, and each laughed at the others' sin.

Oh, gluttony, full of cursedness! Oh, first cause of our confusion! through gluttony was this whole world corrupted. Adam, our father, and his wife were driven from Paradise for that vice. For whilst Adam fasted (as I read) he was in Paradise, and when he ate of the fruit forbidden he was cast forth to woe and labor. Now to my tale.

These three rioters, of whom I tell you, long ere any bell had rung 'prime,' were set in a tavern to drink, and, as they sate, they heard a little clinking bell before a corpse that was being carried to the grave. One of them called to his boy, 'Go out, and ask quickly what corpse is that that passes here, and see thou bring his name back right.'

'No need for that, master,' said the boy, 'it was told me two hours ere you came here; 'tis one of your old mates: he was slain suddenly last night, for as he lay stark on his bench drunk, there came a privy thief, that men called Death, who is killing all the folks in the country; and with his spear he smote his heart in two, and went his way without a word. He has slain full a thousand, this pestilence! And, master, before you too come in his way, methinks 'tis as well to beware of such a foe; be ready to meet him—thus my dame taught me, sir.'

'St. Mary!' cried the tavern-keeper, 'the child speaks truth! He hath killed this year in a big village, something over a mile hence, both man and woman, child and hind and page. Sure he must have his very home there. It would be wise for any man to be ready for him before he did him a mischief!'

'Blood and bones!' cried the rioter, who was half-mazed with drink, 'and is it such peril to meet with him? I will seek him out by lane and street—I vow it by heaven and hell! Hark ye, mates; we three be one? Let each of us hold up his hand* to the others, and we'll be sworn brothers; and then we will go out and settle this false traitor, Death! By all the majesties, he shall be killed who kills so many, before night falls!'

Together then the three plighted their troth to live and die with each other as though they were born brothers; and up they staggered together with horrid oaths, as it were tearing to pieces the blessed body of our Lord—Death should die, if they could catch him! Right then, as they were crossing over a stile, when they had gone scarcely half way, they met an old man and poor, who greeted them full meekly, and said, 'Lordings, God save you.'

The proudest of the rioters answered with a sneer, 'What! sorry carle—why art thou all wrapped up save thy face? Why livest thou so long, old grey beard?'

The old man feared their drunken rage, but he answered meekly as before. Steadily he looked him in the face, and said, 'Because I cannot find a man, though I walk into the Indies, neither in city nor in village, that will change his youth for mine old age. And therefore I must bear my age as long time as it be God's will; and Death, alas! will not have my life. Thus walk I like a restless captive; and on the

ground, which is my mother's gate, early and late I knock with this my staff, and cry, "Dear mother, let me in. Lo! w I dwindle, skin and flesh and blood. Alas! when shall these bones find rest? Mother, with you I'd barter all my goods that in my chamber so long a time have been—yea, but for a hair shroud to wrappen me." But yet she will not do me that grace; wherefore my face is pale and wrinkled.

'But, sirs, in you 'tis unworthy to speak discourteously to an old man; except he do ill in word or deed; for in Holy Writ you yourselves may read that respect is due to the aged, whose head is hoar. Wherefore I counsel you, do no more harm to an old man now than ye would have men do to you in your old age, if ye abide to live so long; and God be with you, wheresoever ye go. I must pass on my way.'

'Nay, thou old churl, by heaven! that thou shalt not,' cried out another of the gamblers. 'By Saint John, thou partest not so lightly from us! Thou spak'st right now of that rascal death, that killeth all our friends in this country. By my troth now, thou art his spy! Tell us where he is, or (and another volley of oaths followed) we will slay thee. Find Death for us, or abide it sore! Sure, thou art in his plot to slay us young folk, thou false old thief!' Then the old man, seeing that they could hear no reason, for they were beside themselves, devised a way to rid him of them.

'Nay, sirs, if ye be so eager to find Death, turn up this crooked way; for, by my faith, I left him in that grove, under a tree, and there he will bide and by no means skulk away, for all your boast and noise. See ye that oak? Right there shall ye find him. Save you and amend you Christ, who redeemed mankind.'

Thus spake this aged man, and the rioters ran forward till they came to the tree he had pointed to, and there, behold they found well nigh (as it seemed to them) seven bushels of fair coined gold. No longer then they hunted after Death; they forgo the boast and errand. They were so glad at the sight that down they sat beside the precious hoard, and it was the youngest who first found a voice.

'Brothers!' he cried, 'take heed of what I say. I have good wits, though my life be loose! See! Fortune has given us this treasure, that we may live in mirth and jollity. Eh! by all that's good, who would have guessed to-day that we should come by such a piece of luck? But could this gold be yours, carried from this place, down to my house or one of yours (for well I know that it is not ours, this gold), then we should be in felicity; but by day it cannot be! Men would say we were robbers, and we should swing for our own treasure! So we must carry it home by night as wisely and as slyly as we can; and so I counsel that we draw lots, and he on whom the lot falls, with blithe heart shall hie him to the town and privily buy us bread and wine, while the other two shall keep the treasure; and when 'tis night, with one accord we will carry it where we choose.'

That pleased them well, and he held the lots that they all should draw, and the 'cut' fell to himself, the youngest. And he went forth toward the town.

As soon as he was gone, one of the two left on guard spoke to the other:

'Thou knowest well thou art my sworn brother,' he said; 'so I will tell thee thy profit. See now, our mate is gone, and here is gold, and great plenty too, that must be parted among three of us. Nevertheless, if I can shape it so that it were divided betwixt us two, shall I not do thee a friend's turn?'

'I know not how that may be,' said the other. 'He knows well enough the gold is with us twain. What should we do then? What should we say?'

'Shall it be counsel?' said the first rascal. And in a few words I will tell thee what we must do to bring it well about.'

'I promise,' quoth the other, 'by my troth not to betray thee.'

'Now,' quoth the first, 'thou seest we are two, and two of us should be stronger than one. Look, when he is seated, rise thou gaily, as though thou wouldst wrestle with him, and whilst ye are struggling, I will

drive my blade between his ribs, and look thou do the same with thy dagger, and then shall the gold be shared between thee and me, my dear friend! Then may we fulfil all our lusts and gamble as we please.'

Thus these two rascals plotted to slay the third, as I have said.

Meantime the heart of the youngest, as he went to the town, was full of the beauty of the florins, new and bright.

'Ah, Lord!' quoth he. 'If only I could have this gold all to myself alone, no man under heaven would live so merry as I.'

And at last the fiend, our enemy, put in his thought that he should buy a deadly drink and slay his two companions. For why—the fiend found him in such living that he had leave to bring him to grief.

This then was his fixed resolve, to slay them both and never to repent. So on he goes, he will tarry no longer, into the town to an apothecary's shop, and begged him to sell him some poison—to keep down the rats, he said. Moreover, there was a polecat in his hedge that slew his capons, and he longed to have his revenge on the vermin that worried them at night.

The apothecary answered, 'Thou shalt have a thing that, so God save my soul! there is no creature in the world that would not die of it, if he ate or drank even as much as would lie on a corn of wheat; and he will die, too, in less time than it will take to walk a mile, the poison is so strong and violent.'

This cursed rogue then took the poison in his hand hidden in a little box, and then he ran to the next street to a man from whom he got three mighty bottles; and into two of them he poured his poison, the third he kept clean for his own drink; for all night long he thought to labor at carrying the gold out of that place.

So when this graceless villain had filled his three bottles with wine he repaired back to his mates.

What need of further words? For just as they had planned his heath, so they slew him, and that without delay. And when the deed was done, thus cried one of them—

'Now let us sit and drink and make merrily! and afterwards we will bury him.'

And in a little space it happened that he took the bottle in which the poison was; and drank, and his mate drank too, whereby they both died, and I trow that never even in the most learned works were written more horrors, more awful pains of poisoning, than these two wretches suffered ere their end.

Thus died these murderers, and the false prisoner too. O cursed sin of homicide! O drunkenness, the tomb of wit, the origin of foulest sins and deepest ills—how comes it that any man repays in such a way the mercy of Christ who died for him?

Afterwords.

Chaucer conveys in this beautiful tale the strongest rebuke against the consuming passion of gambling and drinking, which in the Middle Ages ruined many a noble house, and many a poor family. Men (and women too) would stake everything they possessed, down to the clothes on their backs; and there remain many caricatures graphic and literary of the wretched gambler who had played himself bare in the tavern, where, as now, vice was encouraged in many ways, and where the tavern-keeper often combined the offices of publican and pawnbroker—nay, bagman as well. The Pardoner says he employed this tale with the utmost effect in the pulpit (without of course practising what he preached), and it brought him always a good collection by arousing the strong public opinion among sufferers and penitents.

The three rioters were probably young men of birth, ruined by folly and licence, who, 'rising up early in the morning to follow after strong drink' (say at five), were sufficiently muddled by 'prime' (nine a.m.), to confuse the allegorical mention of Death by a little serving-lad with the proper name Death, not uncommon in some parts of the country, but still able to stumble out arm-in-arm in search of the local scourge. Sobered by the treasure-trove, their frightful end is a culmination of deliberate sin—murder. For why?—The fiend found him in such living that he had leave to bring him to grief, says the old moralist. M. E. H.

*Still the ceremony used in taking an oath in Prussian courts of justice.